

GUIDELINES FOR CHURCHES DEALING WITH EXTREMIST POLITICAL PARTIES

Introduction

These Guidelines are based on work carried out by the Methodist Church. This involved a process of wide consultation that included churches from within the Baptist Union of Great Britain, and so is being made available in a form that reflects Baptist concerns and convictions. It seeks to answer some of the practical questions faced by churches in areas where councillors from extremist parties have been elected.

Background

In April 2007, the Faith and Unity Executive of BUGB stated that it:

1. Notes with concern the rise of political extremism and the presence of racist parties operating within the political life of this country.
2. Believes that the policies and practices of those who promote racism and religious intolerance are incompatible with biblical teaching and our understanding of the nature of God as revealed in the life and teaching of Jesus Christ.
3. Encourages full voting participation in local, national and European elections, but urges people not to vote for candidates who promote, give assent to, or are associated with racist policies.
4. Calls upon churches in membership with BUGB to practice and promote racial justice and inclusion, and reject any political parties that attempt to stir up racial and religious hatred, and fear of asylum seekers and migrant workers.

In 1999 the Baptist Assembly passed a resolution affirming the 'Atlanta Covenant'. This was a call from the Baptist World Alliance to oppose racism and ethnic conflict and to actively work to establish a united witness for Christ and his kingdom.

Rooted in scripture, the 'Atlanta Covenant' resolved to be committed to racial justice as an integral part of proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ. It recognised a failure to consistently address the issue of racism and the need for repentance from the sin of racism. It affirmed that all humankind is made in the image of God. It called for a covenant based on reconciliation and the promotion of justice through efforts to eradicate racism.

These Guidelines are to help BUGB churches respond to the statement by the Faith and Unity Executive, and to live out the 'Atlanta Covenant' within the context of local politics in this country. Written in the form of Frequently Asked Questions, it seeks to help churches make often difficult decisions. They arise from conversations with ministers and lay people in areas where extremist parties are active, and where churches are facing new challenges about how they relate to local politics and politicians. The questions represent real situations faced by local churches.

1. We have BNP councillors representing our ward. As they are democratically elected, shouldn't we try to work with them, even if we disagree with their policies?

Churches may come under pressure to co-operate with local councillors from extremist parties who, after all, the argument goes, have been elected by local people. Indeed many churches will feel they are under an obligation to work with our democratic system. However people are not obliged to do so if this is not in the interests of the common good.

- **Policies proposed by extremist parties do not promote the well-being of all members of our society.** Their beliefs are very different from the healthy sense of patriotism or love for their country felt by most people. Nationalistic parties such as the BNP advocate the superiority of white British people, and support their rights and well-being over people with an African, Asian or mixed heritage, many of whom are equally British and whose families have lived here for generations. Their publicity has particularly targeted asylum seekers, talking of “floods” or “invasions”, and blaming them for shortages of housing and jobs. The party has also singled out Muslims, using the word “Muslim” as a codeword for “Asian”, talking about the “Islamic Menace”, and arguing that Muslims threaten the British “way of life”. We believe these policies, and the myths, half-truths, fear and hatred that extremist parties promote, are incompatible with biblical teaching and our understanding of the love of God for all people. Christians are called to consider seriously for which party they vote; for the same reasons they are also called to consider with whom they are prepared to associate themselves.
- **Co-operation can give extremist parties credibility.** When the first BNP councillor was elected in the Isle of Dogs in 1993 the community and the churches mobilised to encourage voter registration and support for other parties. Now Britain has 47 BNP councillors and there is little vocal opposition. There is the danger of some local complacency creeping in: “we have a BNP councillor, we didn't vote for them, but it's not too bad, they've not tried to expel any Asians yet”. Yet any co-operation with extremist parties gives those parties credibility. People should be reminded of the reasons for the original objections to the party and its policies.
- **Extremist parties are not democratic parties.** Although councillors may be elected democratically, the BNP itself is not a democratic party. Not everyone can join the BNP – they are explicit that people who do not come from a white British background are not welcome in the party – and their racist policies mean that one person's vote is valued more than another person's.

Some people feel that it is only by debate that the falseness of policies can be exposed, whilst others argue that such extremists should not be given the “oxygen of publicity”. Churches face a dilemma of whether they should refuse to give extremists credibility by engaging with them, or take the risk of working to change people's minds. There are great risks of being used by extremist parties, of appearing to give them credibility and of alienating those who are threatened by extremist policies, and churches have to guard against naivety. In most cases it is better to refuse to work with extremist politicians, and instead to build up broad community relations. Churches should not dismiss the grievances which lead people to vote for extremist parties, and work to tackle these. Churches should consider the issues very carefully, talk with others, and consider the impact on others, before deciding to work with extremist parties.

However there are some people for whom such policies of “non-engagement” are not possible. Many Christians are employed by local authorities and have to work regularly with local councillors, whether or not they agree with their policies. Some senior people will be prevented from joining in the alternative political activity open to others who wish to oppose extremism. Churches should be aware of the complex ethical dilemmas these people will face on a daily basis and be prepared to offer them pastoral support. This might include prayer, listening, offering opportunities to talk with other church members in similar situations, and having a

sensitivity to how their employment commitments may force them to limit their participation in church activities.

2. We've been approached by our local councillor who is a member of an extremist party asking for our co-operation in a campaign to tackle litter. Shouldn't we work with them to improve our community?

Extremist groups often use "community campaigns" on uncontroversial issues such as tackling litter or road safety to improve their credibility in the area. People who have felt neglected by mainstream politicians or are frustrated by local conditions often respond warmly to practical approaches, regardless of the politics which underpin them. Local politicians can often be seen in isolation from the policies of the national party - this can be particularly true if the extremist councillor is a likeable, apparently a-political local person. But churches should be extremely careful before giving their support to such campaigns.

Councillors may have their sights on re-election in the work they undertake. How can this action, this campaign, this photo opportunity be used to improve the candidate's chances at the next election? For extremist parties, being able to demonstrate co-operation with local churches increases their respectability and gives credence to their racist analysis of local situations.

Party politics is to some extent always a compromise. In a democracy individuals cast their vote in the knowledge that they are not signing up wholeheartedly to every aspect of the package of policies in a party's manifesto. They are choosing the party that has the closest "fit" to their personal outlook. As a result, some people may feel they are having to choose to compromise over deeply held beliefs, such as funding nuclear weapons, because there is no mainstream party offering an alternative policy. It may be argued that working with an extremist party is a similar compromise: you work together on the things you can agree on, but continue to reject their racist policies. The difference here, however, is that whilst some policies may appear indistinguishable from other mainstream parties, extremist parties base their whole ideologies on a racist strategy.

Therefore although a campaign might purportedly be on a topic with which most people would agree, such as tackling litter, it is not possible to separate out this policy from the policies which underpin parties such as the BNP. These are policies which demonise particular religions and people of different skin colour, and glorify an illusory white society of the past. Even an apparently uncontroversial policy on litter is underpinned by an agenda which blames asylum seekers and people of different races for changes and a deterioration in local communities.

If approached about a local campaign such as litter clearance, churches could even consider setting up their own event, working with faith groups or other community partners, and use the occasion for positive publicity. The fears and grievances which can lead people to support extremist parties should not be ignored. Instead churches can be very positive about what they are doing in local communities to help cohesion and tackle underlying concerns.

Some church leaders have found themselves in a difficult position when photographs taken at meetings with members of extremist parties are then later used for publicity purposes implying church support for candidates. Whilst this can be challenged as photos should not be used without permission, the damage will already have been done. Churches need to guard against naivety when dealing with such situations.

3. Should we offer pastoral support to a councillor from an extremist party? What about communion?

In November 2006 the chair of the Commission of Racial Equality, Trevor Phillips, called on churches to refuse communion to supporters of the British National Party. Many Baptists, however, would want to understand communion to be a means of grace and a means of conversion. Communion is therefore offered to all who are looking for a deeper relationship with God. And, for all, taking Communion involves self-examination. In 1 Corinthians 11:27-29 Paul suggests that if people come to communion and don't allow themselves to be challenged in this way, then it is God who will judge them.

Similarly if a member of an extremist party approaches a minister for pastoral support, ministers will have to consider the nature of that support and how it can be offered without offering implicit backing for racist beliefs and thereby making others unwelcome in the church. God never gives up on people, and neither should we.

4. Our local BNP councillor says the party is “defending traditional Christianity”. What do they mean?

Some people who vote BNP do so because they feel that the country is facing frightening forces of change, largely through immigration and the growing number of people from other faiths, particularly Islam. The BNP claims to offer a way of preserving “our past”, and this includes the preservation of a culture based on Christianity. But their claim that they are representing or defending “Christianity” is nonsense. Christianity is neither exclusively white nor British. Christianity in urban areas has experienced a revival from black Christians. Indeed our confidence that Christ speaks to all people is reflected in the fact that Christianity is the most multiracial, multicultural movement on the planet. All Christians should be deeply concerned that some people are now appropriating Christian language and symbols for policies that are the very opposite of Christian values.

The real agenda behind the claim is a cultural one – partly in opposition to a perceived secular liberal elite, and largely in an attempt to whip up opposition to Muslims and others of minority faiths. It also exploits the confusion between faith and race – extremist parties claim they are not being racist because they are opposing a religion rather than members of a particular race.

The BNP has recently been linked with a body calling itself the Christian Council of Britain. Although the BNP denies that the Council is a front organisation, it has clearly been involved in setting up and defending the Council.

As Baptists we believe it is outrageous for extremist parties to use Christianity to further their agenda of segregation and division, and want to affirm that Christian belief is incompatible with any political party or philosophy that is based on hatred or treats people as inferior because of their race, religion or for any other reason. We want to encourage inter faith dialogue as a means of promoting understanding between people of different faiths, clearly rejecting methods based on confrontation.

5. What if our church is approached by a BNP councillor seeking a venue for a surgery or meetings with constituents?

Many BNP councillors struggle to find meeting spaces as community organisations often refuse to allow them to rent their rooms. People who are unhappy with this situation argue that councillors are democratically elected, and constituents should not be denied the right to meet with their representatives.

What is the role of the church in offering space to those with whom it disagrees? Some churches are currently having conversations about offering “radical hospitality” to people with different theological views or different faiths. Yet even this is within the context that these

groups must be committed to building understanding between faiths and not discriminate against people on the grounds of race.

Churches are not obliged to rent rooms to a particular political party, even if other parties use the rooms, if it is felt that they represent values which are contrary to our understanding of the Christian faith. Baptist churches may want to ensure that premises are not used by groups with which we would not want dialogue, and that groups must be committed to building understanding between faiths and not discriminate against people on the grounds of race. The Charity Commission states that, although charities should not generally discriminate between organisations on the basis of the views they hold, *“a charity may be justified in declining to allow a particular organisation or individual to use its premises because of the risk of public disorder or alienating the charity’s beneficiaries or supporters.”* (CC9 – Political Activities and Campaigning by Charities).

A significant danger is that, by allowing members of extremist parties to rent rooms, the church gives them credibility. There is a perception amongst many church members, and possibly many non-church goers, that the church approves of activities and groups held on church premises. Would you be comfortable if a local person with housing problems came to a surgery on Baptist premises to be told by their local councillor that they couldn’t get a new home because of the number of “foreigners” being housed locally?

The refusal to rent rooms to extremist councillors should not leave local people without access to support. Most wards are multi-member, and where the other members represent other parties, residents can attend their surgeries instead. In areas represented solely by a single party, the other parties can also hold surgeries, sometimes attended by councillors from other wards. The majority of case work undertaken by councillors now takes place via phone or email and it is always open to councillors to visit constituents in need of help in their own homes. People may approach their MP, or voluntary groups such as Citizens Advice with particular problems. Finally if people do want to meet with their councillors they can make appointments to see them at the Town Hall or council offices.

6. The local authority nominates some of the governors of schools in our area from local political parties. What can we do if we are faced with a school governor who is a member of the BNP?

This may be a concerning prospect for parents, teachers and governors at schools in areas with extremist councillors, and it will be of particular concern to faith-based schools where the governing body determines the religious ethos of the school. Statements by the BNP, for example, are incompatible with our understanding of the Gospel, the purpose of education, diversity and inclusiveness. Governors who fundamentally disagree with schools’ equality or admission policies risk undermining the purpose of the school.

There is no provision for the governing body of a voluntary school to prevent the local authority appointment of a particular person as their representative, although if the person has already made public statements that would conflict with the school’s ethos, it would be wise for the promoters to point out that there could be difficulties. However, governing bodies have a specific duty to promote equality of opportunity and to promote good relations between persons of different racial groups. No single governor can take any action or can promote any activity separately; governance is a corporate activity and governors can suspend a governor who "has acted in a way that is inconsistent with the school's ethos or with the religious character and has brought or is likely to bring the school or the governing body or his or her office of governor into disrepute"¹. This suspension can only be pursued as a last resort “after seeking to resolve any difficulties or disputes in more constructive ways”. Going through these procedures will clearly

¹ See School Governance (Procedures) (England) Regulations 2003

be difficult for the school and for governors who will be required to act rigorously and in the face of opposition. Churches may look for ways to offer support to governing bodies which decide to proceed in this way.

7. Our minister is regularly contacted by local journalists for comments on BNP campaigns. Should we respond?

There are very valid concerns about giving groups such as the BNP the “oxygen of publicity” by responding to requests for comments on their activities. However if journalists are seeking comments it is likely they will run stories anyway, and it may be worth taking the opportunity to speak out against racism, whilst bearing the following points in mind:

- Reference should be made to the Union’s opposition to racism and extremist parties, perhaps using the statement by the Faith and Unity Executive
- Extremist parties are skilled at exploiting genuine local concerns. Therefore you should not get into a debate on the concerns themselves, or solutions to them. Rather keep the focus on the fact that as Baptists we are opposed to racist parties because they are racist parties
- Similarly do not be drawn into commenting on the individuals involved. However “nice” and hard-working individual councillors may appear, the policies and practices of extremist parties are racist and intolerant and must be opposed on that basis.

Baptists may choose to support many different political parties or policies, and we do not attempt to steer people to any particular choice: rather we are all urged to be wary of racism dressed up as “sensible politics,” to speak out against racism wherever we see it and to challenge it in our communities.

We hope you find these guidelines useful.

**If you require any further information, please contact the Faith and Unity Department:
Baptist House, 129 Broadway, Didcot, Oxfordshire OX11 8RT**
